

THE WASHINGTON POST

November 23, 2001

Trust, and Interest, In Government Soar On College Campuses

By Michael A. Fletcher

COLUMBUS, Ohio -- Moments after the doors swung open for Ohio State University's annual career day last week, a small crowd formed at the CIA table. Throughout the day, a group of students five and six deep waited to drop off résumés and discuss job opportunities at the nation's best-known spy shop.

"I think it would be a very interesting job," Lloyd Abrenica, a business student with a tiny American flag pinned to his lapel, said after his second chat with an agency recruiter. "After the terrorist attacks, I think working for the CIA would be a way to help out my country."

The favorable interest is a welcome change for the CIA, which to an earlier generation of college students had come to symbolize the worst of U.S. foreign policy. The CIA's presence on campus once drew protesters who excoriated the agency for a dubious series of Cold War adventures, including assassination plots on foreign leaders and its alleged role in overthrowing popular regimes in nations from Congo to Chile.

But after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks that killed nearly 4,200 people in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania, trust in the spy agency -- and the rest of the federal government -- is soaring on campus.

A nationwide survey released this month by Harvard University's Institute of Politics found that 3 of 5 college students trust the federal government to "do the right thing" all or most of the time. A year earlier, just 36 percent of college students expressed a similar belief.

In addition, 75 percent of 1,200 undergraduates surveyed said they trust the military to do the right thing, 69 percent trust the president and 62 percent trust Congress. Students have also voiced strong support for the war in Afghanistan, with 4 in 5 saying they support U.S.-led airstrikes and 2 in 3 backing the use of ground troops. The levels of support for the war among college students are similar to those found for the nation as a whole.

Pockets of dissent, in the few places they exist, have been small. Students have staged antiwar protests at some schools, including Stanford University, the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Wisconsin. But those demonstrations seem to run counter to the prevailing pro-government mood on the nation's campuses.

In the two months immediately after the terrorist attacks, the CIA said it received 28,000 résumés, many of them from college students. That is about the number it typically receives in a year. Other intelligence and law enforcement agencies, including the National Security Agency and the FBI, have reported similar increases in student interest.

"We've been a lot more busy," Sharon Cordero, a CIA recruiter, said as she waited to greet students at Ohio State. "A lot of people are a lot more interested in working for the government. They want to help their country. It's nice to see."

Even before the attacks, a cooling economy meant fewer private-sector job openings for college students, prompting more students to look to the government for work. A survey of 439 firms last summer by the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that companies intended to hire nearly 20 percent fewer college graduates than last year.

But job placement professionals say much of the interest in intelligence and law enforcement agencies seems driven more by a new attitude among students than the realities of the marketplace.

"It is not like all the students are flocking to the FBI or CIA," said Amy Thaci, a career counselor at Ohio State for nine years. "But there is clearly more respect among students for those careers than there used to be."

William Rufus, a computer and information sciences major from Cleveland, interned at a bank last summer. But he says he is intrigued by the idea of a CIA career. He is not put off by the modest pay, which starts at about \$35,000 a year.

Neither is he daunted by the months of background checks. Nor is he discouraged by the reality that the bulk of the agency's jobs involve not James Bond-type spying, but relatively mundane tasks of collecting, analyzing

and evaluating data for U.S. political leaders.

"I guess I feel a little bit of a patriotic surge right now," he said.

That sentiment is apparent across the sprawling Ohio State campus. As nearly 2,000 students streamed through the university job fair, three students held down the early afternoon shift at a "peace camp" on a grassy square in the center of campus.

At the camp -- five tents pitched on a lawn -- a tie-dyed-style poster summed up the aim of the protesters, who plan to maintain vigil at least until December. "War is not healthy for children and other living things," it said, stealing a phrase from Vietnam War-era demonstrators.

"We're really trying to raise awareness among students about U.S. foreign policy," said Beth Josephsen, a theater major.

A flier handed out by the protesters lists what they see as some uncomfortable truths about the war in Afghanistan. Among them, it says, are that Afghanistan is prime territory for pipelines leading from the oil-rich Caspian Sea; that the Northern Alliance has a human rights record comparable to the Taliban's; and that it is difficult to wage war against terrorism, a tactic that can be adopted by anyone.

The lesson is not widely appreciated. An occasional student flashes a thumbs up while strolling by. And one stranger dropped off vegetable lasagna to fortify the protesters. But overall, the month-old

demonstration has been met mostly with indifference and, at times, hostility.

One night, students bombarded the protesters with water balloons. On two other occasions, students have barreled through the camp, toppling and breaking tents. "This is a sensitive time," said Matt Snyder, a protester from Dublin, Ohio, shaking his head.

Dan Christie, a psychology professor at Ohio State's campus in Marion, said the patriotic mood on campus simply reflects the plainest realities of this war. College campuses were a hotbed of activism during Vietnam because most people could not understand "why we were there," he said.

In contrast, he said, the entire nation not only witnessed the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, but also was personally threatened by them. Consequently, he said, many students have little question that this war -- and their government -- are right.

"Everyone is really rallying around the flag," said Christie, who specializes in the psychology of peace. "But, say, if the bombing goes on three or four more months, I think you will have many more people raising questions about the cost of lives."

Right now, the war on terrorism seems to be going well, making heroes of those who were once widely viewed with skepticism.

Lt. Col. Jack L. Gumbert II, commander of the university's 140-cadet Army ROTC program, said the new attitude is evident across campus. More students are inquiring about ROTC. The huge throng of tailgaters that gathers before Ohio State football games used to form an obstacle course for 30 ROTC cadets who marched through with a large American flag to hoist over home games. Now, the crowd parts respectfully, and a couple of times, it has applauded as the cadets marched by.

"I have had students just come up and thank me when they have seen me in uniform," said Brian Pfeister, an ROTC senior.

After a Veterans Day ceremony to honor the more than 900 Ohio State alumni who have perished in the armed forces, students stopped to shake the hands of ROTC officials. One said simply: "I just have to shake your hand. Now, I appreciate why you're here and what you're doing."